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Lesson Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the heart of the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating the intricate details of the time and place assist us in comprehending the motivations of the characters. In this lesson, use cultural and historical contexts to begin to explore the novel.

The novel spans from the 1920s through the 1980s, following two generations of women. Mothers, born and raised in China, find themselves in San Francisco raising their own daughters. Both must navigate two worlds, with different languages, cultures, and habits. Through the mothers, members of the Joy Luck Club, we view Chinese coming-of-age stories. Through the daughters, we follow a struggle to understand one's Chinese heritage while coming-of-age in the United States, as Asian-Americans. Jing-Mei "June" Woo explains at the end of the novel, "I am becoming Chinese."

While significant historical events would mark the lives of these women, nothing permeated their lives as deeply as their role in family and marriage. In China, strength of character was built through respect for elders: "how to obey parents and listen to your mother's mind. How not to show your own thoughts, to put your feelings behind your face...Why easy things are not worth pursuing..." In America, young women can become a force of change within their own lives, 'learning to shout.' Mournfully, Ying Ying St. Clair declares at the end of the novel, "How could I know these two things do not mix?" (p. 254). San Francisco provides the setting in which this conflict unfolds in the lives of eight women.

Discussion Activities

Using internet research, have students create a virtual tour of San Francisco's Chinatown to present to the class. What kind of food is available? What sorts of cultural events are taking place? What are the contemporary social issues of this Asian and Asian-American community?

Using a map of San Francisco, begin to map some of the locations that will be encountered in the novel: Golden Gate Park, Angel Island, Chinatown, Oakland Chinatown, Stockton Street, North Beach, and University of California, Berkeley.



Writing Exercise

In the first chapter, analyze the prologue "swan story." How might this story set the stage for the entire novel?



Homework

Have students read "Amy Tan's Style and Her Other Works" in the Reader's Guide. Have them finish the section "Feathers from a Thousand Li Away" (pp. 49-83). Ask them to think about who is telling the story so far, and whether the voices seem in any way connected.